



HOME

WHO WE ARE ▾

NEWS AND EVENTS ▾

GIVING ▾

CHURCH GOVERNANCE ▾

VITALITY AND GROWTH ▾

CONTACT US ▾

Defending Religious Freedom for Equal Marriage

Dear Friends in Christ,

Imagine that you are a pastor and one day, a couple comes to you and asks you to marry them; you counsel with them and agree. The next day, another couple comes to you and asks the same of you, and state law prohibits you from agreeing to conduct their religious ceremony. Why should the state control a minister's pastoral decisions?

Or imagine that you are a minister making an emergency pastoral visit in a hospital. You arrive at the ER and learn that one member of this couple is dying due to injuries from an accident. His partner asks you to perform the marriage that was planned for two months hence. She pleads with you. Your pastoral heart and your conscience require you to offer this pastoral service. But state law not only prohibits you from conducting the marriage service without a license, but also will impose potentially large fines and a jail sentence of up to 120 days if you do.



In North Carolina, this is the reality for clergy. State laws have infringed deeply on the free exercise of religion. A pastor who chooses to perform a religious marriage for an elderly couple who does not want

the state involved in their relationship at this stage of life—but want the affirmation of God and the Church—is prohibited from doing so. A pastor who is asked by members of his or her church to perform a same-gender religious marriage service will suffer retribution from the state.

On April 28, 2014, the General Synod of the United Church of Christ filed suit in federal court in Charlotte, North Carolina contesting the constitutionality of that state's laws on marriage. These laws prohibit a clergyperson from performing a marriage without a license having been issued by the county in which the ceremony is to be performed. The basis for the Synod's suit is that these laws constitute an infringement of our constitutional rights of freedom of religion.

For us, as one of the founding religious traditions of this nation, the principle of free exercise of religion is a paramount value. Because we are not a hierarchical church, the freedom of every clergyperson to conduct the rites and sacraments of the Church according to the dictates of conscience is essential to our identity and our faith practice. These laws mean that a pastor cannot perform a service of religious marriage under the circumstances described above.

No matter what one believes about urgent or elder religious marriage or same gender religious marriage, the fundamental breach of free exercise of religion is what is at stake here. We cannot afford to allow this law to stand. Once government is allowed to dictate what we – or any other faith tradition – may or may not do in the practice of our faith, then we are truly on a slippery slope. This is where we take our stand. We do so not only because it affects our clergy in North Carolina so profoundly, but because we will always defend the free exercise of religion – anyone's religion.

I believe this is a very important step for the UCC to take in defense of the freedoms we hold dear. As far as we know, this is the first time a religious entity has sued on the grounds that these laws violate First Amendment rights, so we are breaking new ground. But it is ground that you and I need to have broken or our pastoral ministries right here in Southeast Conference (which includes pastors in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Tennessee) could suffer the same infringement at some future time.

I encourage you to visit www.ucc.org/ido to learn more about this lawsuit and the reasons for it. It is important that we all understand the basis in law for this suit, and the basis in conscience as well.

In Christ,

June Boutwell, Designated Conference Minister

Share this:

[Facebook](#)[Twitter](#)[Google](#)[Tumblr](#)[Pinterest](#)[LinkedIn](#)[Print](#)[Email](#)